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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1764
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 5238
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 8838
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 6410
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 2033
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 000061

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CVIS](#) [CASC](#) [BM](#) [KPAO](#)
SUBJECT: BURMA'S CENSOR BOARD: STANDING IN THE WAY OF PRESS
FREEDOM

REF: A. RANGOON 35
[1](#)B. 08 RANGOON 114

RANGOON 00000061 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: APAO Drake Weisert; section 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Press Scrutiny and Registration Board (Censor Board) continues to exert a powerful and negative influence on Burma's media, despite the emergence of many privately owned newspapers and magazines in recent years. Editors complain of heavy-handedness and arbitrary censorship and see no signs of liberalization. The Censor Board has proven reluctant to allow positive press coverage of Western, including U.S. Embassy, activities in Burma. Despite pledges by the Director of the Censor Board to increase transparency, it is unlikely that he has the clout or interest to implement major change. We comment that, nonetheless, Embassy media efforts are useful, and some local journalists encourage us to keep "pushing the envelope." End Summary.

The Role of the Censor Board

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Censor Board is responsible for reviewing and approving all published material in Burma. Director Tint Swe, a retired Army major, took over the office following the ousting of Prime Minister and Military Intelligence Chief Brigadier General Khin Nyunt in 2004. Despite some hopeful signs of liberalization early on, Tint Swe's Censor Board has proven to be equally or more restrictive than that of his predecessors. This has been particularly true in the period since the public uprising in September 2007. In October 2008, the Ministry of Information issued a circular that requires all government departments to notify the Censor Board of any information that should be "withheld, censored, and not released." The end result is likely to be even more subjects that will be off limits for journalists.

Undue Burdens on Editors

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Censor Board requires media outlets to submit stories for review between two to five days before publication. Decisions by Board reviewers are final and

there is no appeal process; editors cannot resubmit an article after it has been rejected. Because some articles are invariably cut, editors typically prepare more articles than fit in the publication - creating additional costs. Every newspaper must include at least one "planted" - or propaganda - piece in each edition. Examples include articles criticizing the NLD and encouraging public support for the government's "road map to democracy".

14. (C) To meet deadlines, editors must scramble to reformat their publications after receiving edits from the Board. Since September 2008, MOI has increased this burden by requiring editors to resubmit final page layouts for review. MOI has also increased restrictions on the types of articles that can appear on the front page and the size of photos. Punishments for violating these regulations include confiscation of printing presses and cancellation of printing licenses - though we are not aware of this happening. According to Thiha Saw, editor and owner of Myanma Dana Business Magazine, publishers often pay bribes to the Board to ensure that their publications pass quickly.

What the Censor Board Cuts

15. (C) The Censor Board prohibits reporting on a range of topics beyond the obvious ones of politics and corruption. Saw Lin Aung, Deputy Chief Editor of Flower News Weekly, told us that newspapers are not allowed to publish articles critical of China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. He said the Board cut much of his newspaper's reporting on the tainted milk scandal in China last year. Newspapers are also not allowed to report on economic problems. Ross Dunkley, Editor-in-Chief of the Myanmar Times, showed us returned

RANGOON 00000061 002.2 OF 003

copies from the Board with red pen slashes through articles on the current financial woes of Burmese farmers and traders, who are unable to sell and export their rice because of low prices. The local press also cannot print stories on the effect of the world financial crisis on Burma, despite considerable international and exile media attention on the subject. More mundanely, censors drew an "x" through Myanmar Times photos of clothed women that were considered a bit too revealing.

16. (C) The Board also closely monitors crime reporting. Authorities arrested a reporter for Flower News/Yangon Times in September 2008 after he reported on a well-known murder case in Rangoon. Soon after, MOI issued a regulation requiring reporters to speak only with designated police spokesmen. (Also a factor: police agencies publish their own crime tabloids and are wary of competition from the private sector, according to Dunkley from the Myanmar Times).

17. (C) The Board's decisions are often capricious. Nwe Ni, editor of Current Affairs and Literary Monthly, reported that Board reviewers cut an article on corn ethanol. He surmises the reason is because the pronunciation of the word corn in Burmese is the same as "change;" The Myanmar Times is also not allowed to use the word change in its headlines. Censors cut a harmless photo of an actress from Nwe Ni's paper, presumably because the photo caption date was August 1988 - the same date as a major protest. Artist Mrat Lunn Htwann, who recently published a book on Burmese art, said the Board cut paintings with too much red - the color associated with the September 11 protests. Saw Lin Aung from Flower News told us a censor almost cut his front page story on the Brazilian national soccer team because the color yellow - associated not only with the Brazilian team but also with Aung San Suu Kyi - was too prominent.

Our Own Experience with the Censor Board

18. (C) The Censor Board also interferes with press coverage

of some Western embassies. Decisions sometimes seem arbitrary, though stories that comment on political freedom are unsurprising targets. The Board has censored two newspaper interviews with the Charge D'Affaires in recent months: one with 7 Day News in December 2008 on the presidential transition and the other with the Myanmar Times in January 2009 on the presidential inauguration. (In the case of 7 Day News, the paper actually printed the article with preliminary approval, and later had to print a silvery ad over the top. The original article can still be seen faintly by holding the paper up to the light.) The Board cut an article by the Myanmar Times on the Embassy's November 2008 U.S. presidential election event, which included democracy-related remarks by the Charge. A few weeks ago, the Board cut a photo of the Charge from the Myanmar Times social page, though other photos have appeared in the government's own publication, The New Light of Myanmar, and this week's Myanmar Times social page does include a CDA photo. Go figure. The Board approved an interview with the DCM on the presidential campaign that appeared in the newspaper Modern Journal in October 2008.

¶9. (C) The Censor Board strictly controlled coverage of the inauguration of President Obama. According to Burmese exile media reports, local newspapers were forced to cut parts of Obama's acceptance speech, including the following sentence: "To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist." Some newspapers were forced to put photographs of the inauguration event on inside pages. The Embassy sent a reporter from the newspaper The Voice to the United States on an International Visitors program that coincided with the inauguration. The reporter, Htar Htar Myint, told us the Board cut all of her articles on the event. However, a reporter for 7 Day News who we sent to the United States in November on a Foreign Press Center program was able to publish several articles on the election.

A Visit to the Censor Board

RANGOON 00000061 003.2 OF 003

¶10. (C) PAO and APAO visited the Rangoon headquarters of the Censor Board on January 13 and met with Director Tint Swe (Ref A). When asked why the Board cut the December 2008 interview with the Charge, Tint Swe was evasive and said it was merely "postponed" pending approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Tint Swe was generally cordial during the meeting and did not criticize Embassy programs or publications. (We publish three magazines and occasional books in translation and run journalism classes and workshops at the American Center.) He asked us for assistance in providing basic journalism training to Burmese reporters. He also pledged to increase transparency and said he would help streamline approvals for press coverage of the Embassy. However, he gave no indication that he will introduce reforms or expand press freedoms.

Comment

¶11. (C) Private newspapers and magazines in Burma have exploded in the last decade - well over 100 by most counts - and journalism has become a profitable enterprise. The Censor Board, however, continues to cast a large shadow over the industry, and journalists and editors expect no easing of restrictions in the near future. As for Director Tint Swe, even if he wanted to implement change - and he has not shown a willingness to do so thus far - it is unlikely he would be able to do much about it. Like most GOB officials, he takes his orders from the top.

¶12. (C) Still, reporters seek the embassy out for interviews and we oblige, including on "political" topics.

The journalist from the Myanmar Times who drafted the recently "delayed" interview with the Charge wrote later to commiserate. She expressed strong interest in continuing to report on USG events, even with a high likelihood of censorship, noting that "pushing the envelope is always important." We agree. At the least such efforts give experience to journalists; and, one way or another, word of the articles circulates, encouraging activists to persevere.

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